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ABSTRACT

After explaining the development of the conscience, or "superego," as closely related to self-esteem, and produced through experiences with caregivers, this discussion indicates the nature of discipline and differentiates between discipline and punishment. Four principles assumed to operate in the development of conscience are specified. Subsequently, stages of the child's first 5 years are discussed in relationship to the development of conscience. These stages include the periods from birth to 18 months, 18 months to 3 years, and 3 to 5 years. (RH)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CONSCIENCE

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A major concern of parents and educators is the development of what we call a conscience, or more technically, a "superego." A conscience is said to exist when the child appears to possess an internal agency for controlling his behavior in a manner which is consistent with the moral standards of the important adults in his environment, primarily his parents. Ideally, the individual's conscience should cause him to feel good about himself and to experience increased self-esteem when he meets the adopted criteria for acceptable behavior. When faced with unacceptable impulses, he should be able to either inhibit or modify their expression, either in form or intensity. Should he fail in this effort, and behave "badly" in relation to his own standards, he should ordinarily experience remorse and lowered self-esteem or guilt. To avoid this painful state, he will tend to avoid similar transgressions in the future.

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The child, of course, is not born with the ability to control himself, and has no reason to do so. He is unaware of moral standards and does not think about consequences for behavior. These capacities for evaluation and self-control develop very gradually throughout childhood. The foundations for the conscience, however, are laid down throughout infancy and early childhood in the context of the child's experiences with those who love and care for him. Guiding the child's behavior in a desirable direction and teaching self-control constitute what we call discipline. There is often confusion between discipline and punishment; discipline is a teaching function, whereas punishment is merely one disciplinary tool. Other methods are usually more effective and carry less risk of undesirable outcomes than punishment alone.

Based on our knowledge of personality development and observations of normal children, we can assume that the following principles operate in the development of conscience: 1) In general, it is easier to modify the expression of an impulse or wish than to try to eliminate it altogether. One can more realistically expect to affect the behavioral expression than to stifle the feelings themselves. 2) The child's emotional attachments are the vehicle for social learning; strong affectional bonds are the basis for the internalization of ideals. 3) Conscience formation is a very gradual process; controlling and channeling natural impulses is a difficult challenge. Such learning must be accomplished by stages, in conjunction with cognitive and motor development. 4) The patterns of discipline the child experiences in relation to his parents (and others) will be reflected in his eventual patterns of self control. Such qualities as consistency or inconsistency, harshness or leniency, predictability or arbitrariness will characterize not only the conscience, but also the child's response to superego demands.

With these general principles in mind, let us turn to the child's first five years of development, noting the characteristics of each stage as they relate to conscience development.

Birth to 18 Months

During this period of infancy, the child gradually acquires some notion of himself as a separate being, but the dividing line between himself and others remains indistinct at times. He cannot really determine who is the originator of shared experiences in many situations. Thus, he will actually experience the parent's "guiding hand" as his own in early infancy, and may easily incorporate certain patterns and inhibitions into his own repertoire of actions. When imitation occurs, the child has no concept of "good" or "bad" to categorize actions; he is apt to imitate any behavior which strikes his

fancy, deriving intrinsic pleasure from repetition.

The very young child's learning is based on action. He learns and develops through opportunities to explore the world, manipulating his body and objects in the environment. Gentle physical guidance and restraint, such as moving his hand away from a hot cup, are the most effective teaching modes during this phase. Verbal cues, such as "no" and "hot" are valuable as additional signals, but should not be relied on to control behavior. When frustration arises, the most useful techniques are distraction or substitution of an acceptable object or activity. It is unrealistic to expect a child of this age to respond to logical explanations or to exhibit much self restraint.

Toward the end of this period, at about 15 to 18 months, the child typically becomes acutely aware of his reliance on his parents and becomes upset if his special person is not readily available. This is a normal phase, based on his expanded awareness, and is not a sign of "spoiling" or regression, as is sometimes thought. At this point, he becomes especially sensitive to praise and approval from his loved ones. Such praise temporarily restores his sense of a solid link to the loving adult and bolsters his confidence in himself; he seems to feel a glowing sense of well-being. Verbal warning may begin to give him pause, because of his sensitivity to adult reactions, but cannot be relied on to control behavior. He still needs lots of protection and guidance. It is often tempting to parents and others to exploit the child's sensitivity to disapproval at this stage to control him through harsh measures which are effective due to his fear of pain or abandonment. Such techniques are apt to generalize, leading him to feel fearful and insecure not just when he is being "naughty." Such measures can therefore lead to general inhibition, extreme dependency, or other personality difficulties which are less likely to result from parents being patient and gently firm.

18 Months to 3 Years

A major achievement of the toddler phase is the development of language. The child acquires a new mode of communication between himself and his family. As he acquires words for objects, activities, and feelings he will begin to comment on his own behavior, demonstrating early rudiments of self-observation. He begins to take pleasure in acting like his beloved adults, and may be observed admonishing or scolding friends, dolls, and even himself, in words and tones reminiscent of his parents'. Despite such awareness and imitation, words are not yet powerful enough to control behavior when the wish is strong. Despite his seeming to "know better," the child may proceed to misbehave; this is not necessarily being defiant or manipulative, but often reflects the child's immaturity and inexperience in self management. Although he may begin to classify behaviors as "good" or "bad," according to the labels others use, he still requires frequent external direction and reminders.

The two-year-old is becoming aware of the discrepancy between his wish to rule his environment and his relative powerlessness. Despite his strong wishes to mold the world and the people around him to his will, he cannot always have his way--a bitter pill, for the most part! Because of his enormous sensitivity to feeling dominated, the wise parent often avoids unnecessary battles and confrontations at this age, using frequent substitution, distraction, or more time in resolving conflicts. When the child must accept frustrations, the patient and sympathetic presence of his parent makes the deprivation more tolerable; gradually, the child's frustration tolerance increases, along with his ability to delay gratification.

Praise and approval remain very powerful incentives to cooperate with adult demands, as does any appeal to the child's wish to become more grown-up and "big." On the other hand, shaming the child for failures or for more babyish behaviors undermines his self-confidence and makes him overly worried

about failures. Repeated experiences of shame and ridicule tend to result, in the long run, in inhibition and restriction of efforts, furtive patterns of misbehavior to retaliate, or generally poor self-esteem.

Toilet training is a significant accomplishment of this stage, and constitutes a step toward development of a conscience. It represents the first major surrender of instinctual gratification in the service of a love relationship. The young toddler has no hesitation, ordinarily, to soil and wet himself, nor any inclination to curb his own impulses and ambitions. He is an active "doer" who pursues his goals with plenty of determination and no appreciation of the messes he makes or the damage he causes. The toilet is a major infringement on his freedom and his is naturally reluctant to accept restraint or submit to domination. The child, however, also wants to cooperate not only because of his wish to please his parents, but because of his wish to be more like them--in control of himself and his body. It is ordinarily these motives which induce the child to use the toilet, finally, despite some misgivings and accidents. Harsh, punitive demands for bowel and bladder control make the child feel angry, afraid, and helpless to defend himself except through failure to comply. Such experiences may result in toddler-like battles enduring into later childhood and maturity, expressed in negative attitudes toward body functions, problems with authority, or other personality difficulties in the area of control and power battles.

In the course of successful toilet training, a change in the child's attitudes may be observed: in order to safequard his new accomplishment against the temptation to soil again, the child adopts the adult view of his body products, regarding them as unpleasant, even unclean. This signifies a major step toward eventual conscience development, since the child has resolved a developmental conflict within himself by converting an

unacceptable impulse into its opposite (reaction formation), and thereafter is unaware of any inclination to revert to his old behaviors. He has adopted the adult cleanliness standard as his own. For a time, he may seem reluctant to use messy materials, such as clay or fingerpaints, or may avoid anything brown or black. This is a normal phase which usually fades on its own.

Typically, the child also begins to behave differently toward those who are vulnerable to his domination: smaller children, animals, etc. The normal toddler impulses to be cruel and destructive begin to be replaced by their opposites. The child may be observed to treat younger rivals with exaggerated tenderness and concern, for example, with only occasional glimpses of any urge to hurt or dominate discernable. This is a very important development, and is a favorable sign that the child is progressing toward the formation of a working conscience which will help him manage his aggressive wishes. This does not mean that the child can now be expected to behave in a consistently civilized fashion without adult guidance, however. He still needs adults to patiently guide him and support his relatively weak control system.

3 to 5 Years

Increasing confidence and independence are the hallmarks of this age span; the child is strikingly curious, ambitious, and competitive. He begins to acquire some understanding of cause and effect, and can therefore learn from natural consequences more easily than the younger child. Also, because he begins to be able to think in terms of categories, the child can generalize his learning somewhat from one situation to another, and understand rules. At this age, verbal warnings become more effective in preventing misdeeds, and the child can appreciate predictions of outcomes or logical arguments--sometimes.

Throughout most of this period, the child will continue to experience

fear of consequences rather than internal guilt. He fears disapproval and punishment from parents, God, or monsters, all sources outside the self. It may seem to him that others will inevitably detect his intentions or misdeeds, which tends to make him avoid the detection rather than the dishonorable deeds. At times, he may imagine fearsome punishments of such monstrous proportions that he becomes overly fearful of animals, monsters, robbers, etc. temporarily. He will not experience real guilt, that punishment from within which one cannot easily evade, until the end of this period, around age five or six. Until this shift is solidly established, the preschooler remains motivated by the presence of guiding adults, and has trouble obeying independently.

The psychosocial pattern which typically dominates this stage of development is the triangle--a pair and an outsider. The child usually feels shut out of his parents' marriage, and will try persistently and ingeniously to win the favor of one parent and exclude the "rival." The child's sense of rivalry often becomes so intense that he will become anxious about punishments that may befall him for entertaining such unbridled ambitions against a loved object. This anxiety may be reflected in many forms: clinging behavior, fearfulness, provocativeness, or a more or less transparent mask of defiant bravado.

Competition and displays of prowess, imaginary or otherwise, are the norm for this age group. They are evidence of the child's normal wish to be a strong, competent adult. They are not a sign that the child will grow up to be a bully or a show-off unless discouraged, as is commonly assumed. Ridicule or scoldings for boastful or exhibitionistic behavior in general will interfere with healthy development and instill both shame and distrust. The child faces a difficult task in accepting his status as a child who must postpone adult gratifications and privileges for years. Intimidating the preschooler by virtue of superior strength or size, or ridiculing him for his

immaturity can make the child feel so belittled that he will become discouraged; in this event, he is apt to either cling to his unrealistic, inflated notion of his capabilities or to regress to even more babyish patterns of behavior. The goal is to help him experience growing pride in his age-appropriate mastery and encourage him to identify with the adults toward this end.

At age five or six, the child ordinarily begins to relinquish his fantasies of possessing a parent exclusively and resolves to become <u>like</u> his parents. In doing so, he takes another major step toward conscience development; he adopts their moral ideals and standards for behavior as he has experienced them. At this point, he actually internalizes the adult standards, repressing most of the forbidden wishes, to avoid continuing conflict that would interfere with his resolve. With the establishment of a rudimentary conscience, he has within himself now the basic set of standards which permit him to regulate his behavior accordingly. He suffers remorse and anxiety when he misbehaves, regardless of whether someone else can detect the unacceptable deed or wish. The struggle with adult "bosses" occupies less of his energies, and he has more freedom to expand his world with peers and learning at school. He can commit himself to the important tasks of latency with relative zest and freedom.